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Gloucester Fatal Fire Investigation Concludes

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan, Gloucester Fire Chief Barry S. McKay and Gloucester Police Operations Commander Joseph F. Aiello have concluded their joint investigation in the fatal fire at 80 Middle Street on December 14, 2007, and determined the fire was not intentionally set.

Area of Origin

Investigators have determined that in all probability, the fire began in the basement in an area near the center of the building. Due to the destruction, it is impossible to determine the area of origin with greater specificity. The fire's origin in that particular area greatly contributed to the quick progression and spread of the fire to other floors within the building.

Unintentional Cause

Due to the complete destruction of the building, the exact cause of this fire is undetermined. Several possible unintentional (accidental) sources of ignition were identified (such as electrical malfunction, human carelessness, etc.) but cannot be independently corroborated due to the damage to the building. Nonetheless, investigators have not found any information or evidence that this fire was either a criminal act or was intentionally set.

Coan said, "Some of the possible ignition scenarios identified by investigators were: improper disposal of smoking materials, an electric lamp igniting a couch, other combustibles too close to a lamp, or a mechanical or electrical malfunction. There is insufficient evidence to render one scenario as the most probable."

Chief McKay said, "This fire was a terrible tragedy for the residents of 80 Middle Street, the worshipers of the Ahavat Achim Temple, the citizens of Gloucester, the firefighters of Gloucester and the city as a whole." He added, "We especially mourn the loss of Mr. Taylor who was known and liked by so many in our community."

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Within hours of the original call, all known occupants of 80 Middle Street were safe and accounted for except for Robert Taylor, age 70, a third floor occupant. Although a positive identification of Mr. Taylor has yet to be established, investigators, using hand tools and hand sifting operations in conjunction with heavy equipment, have recovered portions of human remains, which in all likelihood are those of Mr. Taylor.

The building at 80 Middle Street was a four story, wood framed structure that contained 24 apartments and one office suite. Approximately twenty-five people inhabited this building. In total, eight alarms were struck for this fire. Despite fire suppression activities, the fire quickly spread throughout the building and extended to the Ahavat Achim Temple, located at 86 Middle Street. Both buildings were completely destroyed as a result of the fire. Suppression operations continued until December 19, 2007.

From December 19, 2007 through December 29, 2007, representatives and investigators from the City of Gloucester Fire and Police Departments, the Executive Office of Public Safety & Security, the Essex District Attorney's Office, the Medical Examiner's Office, the Special Operations and Hazardous Materials Divisions within the Department of Fire Services, the federal Urban Search and Rescue Region I team, the Mass. Department of Environmental Protection and State Police assigned to the Office of the State Fire Marshal. State Police Crime Scene Services Section and K-9 units were deployed to this location in attempts to retrieve the remains of Mr. Taylor and to further the cause and origin investigation of this fire. Investigators were greatly assisted by the City of Gloucester and Rockport's Departments of Public Works and by Tally's, Inc., who donated manpower and equipment to the recovery and examination efforts. These recovery and investigative endeavors were periodically interrupted due to structural hazards, snow, below freezing temperatures, and high concentrations of asbestos found to be located inside of 80 Middle Street.